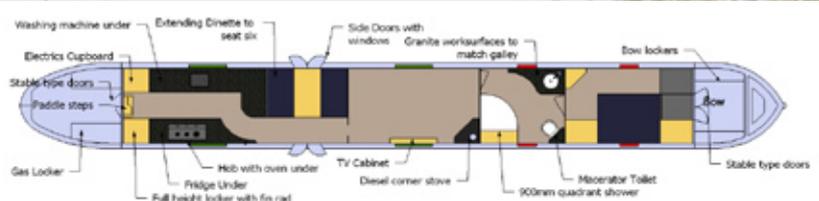


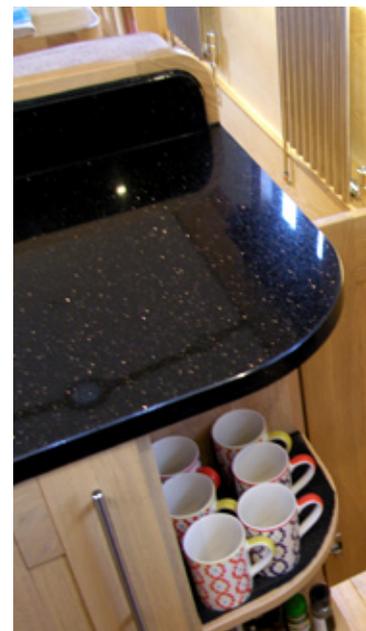
FAST FACTS



**BOAT:** 60ft semi-trad/cruiser stern  
**BUILDER:** Aqua Narrowboats  
**CONTACT:** 01283 701041,  
[www.aquanarrowboats.co.uk](http://www.aquanarrowboats.co.uk)

**BEST BITS**

- Quiet engine and predictable handling.
- Well thought-out lighting and storage.
- Different stern layout – great for families.



**B**oat-builders who run hire fleets tend to construct boats that are meant to last. We take a close look at *Betty B*, a bespoke build from Aqua Narrowboats, based at Mercia Marina on the Trent & Mersey.

*Betty B* is a 60ft cruiser-sterned narrowboat, with some interesting differences. Shell thicknesses at 10/6/4mm is industry standard, though the pert lines are instantly recognisable as a Colecraft. Over many years of boat-building, Colecraft has a loyal following and hold their value extremely well. The beefy internal framing also means that the hull is very sturdy and the cabin side is less likely to flex.

**OUTSIDE**

The aft deck is an interesting mix of cruiser stern and semi-trad styles. The large deck has the layout of a semi-trad, with long lockers either side of the aft door, but instead of solid cockpit sides, a neat balustrade effect, topped with scalloped wooden rails, makes the space much more open and appear bigger. One of the deep lockers (which are recessed into the engine bay) takes the gas cylinders – and with the galley aft, makes a sensibly short run of pipework which minimises maintenance. The port locker is large enough to swallow a couple of folding bikes or deckchairs, while the locker tops and cockpit floor are covered in a teak-effect decking which is very warm to the touch.

With the gas bottles aft, the bow locker now provides extra storage, accessible from the deck hatch and also via a pair of doors into the cockpit. The shortish bow is quite cheeky, and the quality cratch bears a pair of horns and the large tunnel lamp. The cockpit has lockers either side, giving lots of storage for extended cruising, without resorting to assorted bags and boxes.

# A WATERTIGHT DESIGN

Aqua Narrowboats' *Betty B* is a bespoke 60-footer offering plushness, practicality and comfort, together with some intriguing touches. Mark Langley takes a close look...



Excellent joinery such as this curved corner cupboard.



Galley facing forward.



Forward cockpit with lockers.



Cute bow.



Properly fitted sound insulation panels.



Engine installed with traditional stern gear.

The external paint finish – with a cream non-slip roof, dark blue cabin sides, cream coachline and red handrails – looks excellent. It is a two-pack epoxy sprayed finish, expertly applied after the shell has been grit blasted. Taking the gloss paint down to the top-bend does mean that, with a sprayed finish, it will be difficult to touch-in the inevitable scratches, especially on narrow canals where the side fenders will have to be removed.

External vents are chrome and, unusually, there are three pigeon box vents along the boat, which can give excellent ventilation in warm weather. The double glazed windows are also chrome finish; a mix of deep hopper windows aft and large drop-back vent portholes forward. Two pairs of side doors are opposite each other and both have integral glazed panels.

## ENGINEERING AND ELECTRICS

Under the aft deck is a Beta 43hp engine, which drives through a Uniflex coupling and a conventional stuffing box stern gland – which is proven and reliable technology. The two hatches are lined with foil-faced sound insulation, properly secured with screws, rather than just relying on adhesive. The horizontal calorifier and Webasto diesel heater are to starboard, with the large bank of one starter and four domestic batteries opposite, very securely fitted into a steel tray. The engine compartment is neat and very well laid out, with plenty of space to access all maintenance items, though as on many boats, checking the electrolyte levels of the battery cells requires more contortion.

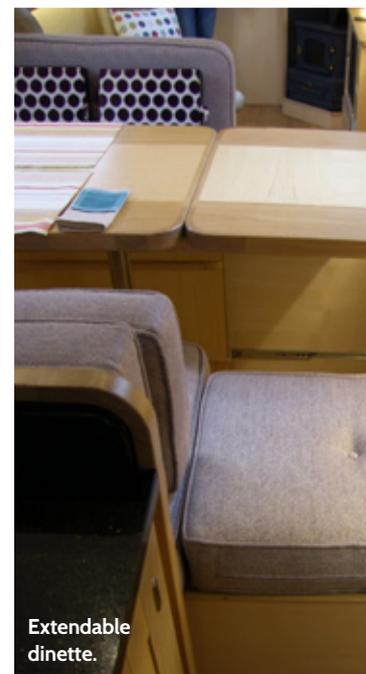
The doors leading down into the cabin from the aft deck have a small chrome

porthole in each one, allowing extra light into the very aft part of the cabin. The steps down are also unusual, being 'paddle'-shaped; this means that they are more compact, but you have to remember which way to go up and down. It does free up a few extra inches in the back of the boat, where the airing cupboard, electric panels and general storage is situated.

The large battery bank supports a 3000W Victron combi inverter, which also gives up to 120A of charging when connected to a shoreline; usefully you can reduce the charging rate, so if you connect to a low-current shorepower (say 5A) you do not trip the circuit. The 12V and 230V circuit breaker panels are sensibly domestic ones, rather than specialised 'marine' ones. This means that if something goes wrong, it can be easily replaced without having to hunt down a specific part. A galvanic isolator, with its own meter, is fitted in the earth return, to reduce stray currents potentially causing corrosion. A Victron battery monitor also allows easy checking of the domestic battery bank for both charging status and level of discharge.



Black sparkly granite worktops in the galley.



Extendable dinette.

**GALLEY**

Betty B is built in a 'reverse layout', which is now so common that a front saloon boat is more of a rarity! The central corridor layout in the galley gives a maximum amount of working space and storage. The black deep sink to port has a hose-style attachment to the mixer tap, while a separate faucet gives filtered drinking water. The work surface is striking sparkly granite, with the units below integrating a 230V fridge with decent freezer compartment. At the end of the galley run, the end cupboard is a well-executed curved door, to match the worktop above.

Opposite, the galley worktop has a very classy black glass gas hob, with three burners arranged in a line fore and aft, with a separate oven and grill below. Having the hob centrally reduces any overhang from pans and means that the cabin side is less likely to get hot. A full-size washing machine fits inside one of the cupboards, giving extended cruising freedom from laundrettes. Under the floor in the galley are two lockers, laid out for wine in one, with space for beer in the other, to keep the drinks cold. Although not unique, here they are smartly lined in easy-clean stainless steel rather than wood, which also increases the cooling effect.

A raised Pullman-style dinette is to port, and comfortably seats four people, with the table dropping down to form a double berth. Good views can be had from the glazed side doors, however, the dinette can be extended by sliding out drawers either side, plus an extra table section that stores under the floor of the dinette, to allow six to dine in comfort; though this does then restrict passage through the boat. The extensions also mean that the dinette can form a huge double berth, or two large single berths running athwartships.

The boat is finished in solid oak and ash, with matching trims throughout, with no



Dinette facing aft.

MDF present anywhere. The cabin sides and roof are in a very pale cream eggshell paint finish, which complements the wood trim that divides up the large panels. The flooring is solid oak, which should give an easy to maintain finish for years to come.

**SALOON**

Lighting is LED throughout the boat, with the exception of the navigation lights and headlamp. The opaque white glass wall lamps give good diffuse lighting, with down lighters providing a brighter working light, which shows that now there is no real need to fit halogen lights, when LEDs have come on so much and use so little power (and are unlikely to need frequent replacement). Under the gunwales, strip LEDs can give remote-controlled colour changing effects, but looked great with a warm white colour, giving excellent background illumination.

The saloon has space for a couple of easy chairs and a sensibly sized TV unit and shelves, on the starboard side. In the corner is a Kabola corner stove, which runs on diesel and is very neatly fitted, with minimum effort needed to maintain it. The central heating from the Webasto boiler heats through a number of stainless steel designer radiators, which are far more attractive than standard white panel convectors – although practical, large white radiators just look cheap and tacky on a high-specification boat. It is good to see that thought has been given to choosing aesthetically-pleasing units – and fitting enough of them to distribute the diesel boiler's heat when it reverts to low-burner setting, which should ensure good life of the boiler.

**BATHROOM**

Although having a walk-through bathroom restricts access through the boat, having



Washbasin in loo, note neat under gunwale colour-changing LED lights.



Underfloor wine locker cooled by the baseplate.



Kabola diesel stove in the corner of the saloon.



Heated towel rail, plus controllable hot-air outlet.

the 'reverse layout' does mean that the main living spaces are still connected to the helm. The bathroom has a large shower on the centreline, with a Jabsco macerator toilet pumping to a large holding tank under the forward berth. A digital waste-level meter is fitted by the loo, which is more sensible than locating it with the engine instruments.

Opposite the loo is a washbasin, set into the same granite worktop as in the galley. As well as having a radiator, the bathroom also benefits from a warm-air outlet, powered by the diesel stove in the saloon. This gives a good flow of warm air into the bathroom, which will also percolate into the forward bedroom, giving extra warmth without having to fire up the central heating boiler – ideal for a slightly chilly morning. This, combined with the extractor fan above the shower, should help reduce condensation as well.



Master bedroom with large cross-bed.

**BEDROOM**

The forward cabin has a cross double berth, which is extended by simply dropping a flap hinged against the port hull side. Rather than having a complicated sliding mechanism, the low-tech approach is taken where appropriate on the boat, to keep it simple and reliable. The large bed has arched overhead cupboards and is flanked by wardrobes and lockers. Very neatly, there are two small cubbyholes either side of the bedhead, which contain a single glass shelf and are lit by switchable LEDs. These are excellent for placing glasses, watches and so



Half-way between cruiser stern and semi-trad aft cockpit.

on, but also give a gentle light so if one of the bed's occupants wants to get up in the night, they won't disturb the other. Two long-arm flexible lamps give a good reading light.

The steps up to the forward cockpit are large, one to port and one to the centreline, which provide a large lined storage void under. In 60ft, the builders have managed to fit in a large quantity of very useable storage, without making the interior seem cluttered or cramped.

### UNDERWAY

Up on deck, the engine started without any smoke and was extremely quiet and vibration free. The main engine panel is inside the aft cabin doors, but the loud alarm should alert the helm to any issues. Reversing out of the berth in a straight line was easy and the boat turned quickly – the owners have not fitted a bow thruster and, given the ease of making the sharp turn out of Mercia Marina, probably saved their money wisely.

At tickover and just above, the boat quietly passed others without pulling any wash. Despite having a short bow, the underwater profile is such that, like most Colecraft shells, it tracked well in a straight line, without a significant bow wave developing at cruising speed. At around 1400rpm, the engine was very quiet, with the hospital generator silencer muting the exhaust note, while the sound insulation did a good job. Given full lining of the engine room, it could be almost silent; the Beta engine lends itself well to acoustic treatment.

The tiller was light, but with enough feel to give confidence. Winding was achieved easily, with the engine controls well set-up and the PRM150 gearbox giving smooth clunk-free changes and progressive throttle control allowing fine tweaking of speed.

### WW VERDICT

A solidly-built shell from a renowned company, combined with the pragmatic, well-engineered fitting out from an experienced hire fleet operator, gives a boat that inspires confidence in its reliability and longevity. The interior has a warm, welcoming feel, with a layout that is great for a couple cruising, who also want to entertain friends for the day or longer. The galley makes excellent use of space and masses of storage throughout the boat will make extended cruising pleasurable. With the price of an equivalent boat of around £125,000.

### THE HIRE FLEET

Aqua Narrowboats runs a fleet of five boats, which are 50ft and 58ft in length; the shorter ones being 2+2 boats, with the larger ones fitting in an extra double or two single berths. Inside and out, these hire-boats look every bit a private craft – in fact, were it not for the discrete logos on the exterior paintwork, you could easily be fooled into thinking they are high-class private boats.

Inside there is ample space for the full crew to eat, as well as lots of storage for holiday belongings. The saloons are based around a generous galley and a dinette (which also forms a double berth); the main difference compared to many new private boats is the lack of open saloon space; hire-boats tend to use space more efficiently and so can fit in extra berths. Side corridor bathrooms mean that there is always a free passage through the boat, while sleeping cabins are separated to give a good degree of privacy for the occupants. Out of season prices start at around £704 for a 2+2 berth boat for a week in the spring, rising to £1,425, for the larger boats in August, all including fuel.

A big advantage of a boat-builder having a hire fleet is you can try before you buy. Also, Aqua Narrowboats runs sponsored boats, so you can buy a boat at a discounted rate, have it placed into the fleet for four years, at which point it then becomes yours. During the time in the fleet, you still get use of the boat (around six weeks a year), and you also get around 38% of the hire income returned to you each year, as well as discounted maintenance. This is one way that owners can get a boat at a good price, while enabling Aqua to keep a young hire fleet.



The company has recently taken on two apprentices, which in these lean times is a good investment in a new generation of boat-builders. As well as building and hiring boats, the company also runs a very clean dry-dock, which can accommodate one wide-beam or two narrowboats, and offers a full engineering service.

